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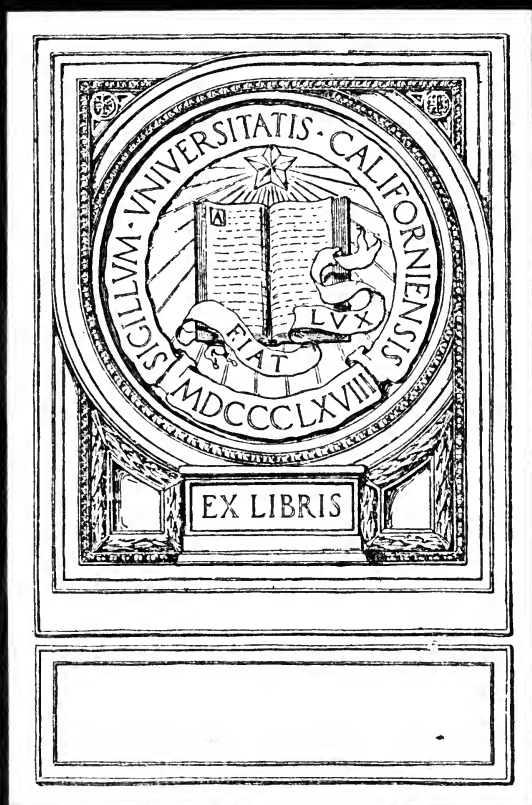
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# THE BRITISH ACADEMY

## WARTON LECTURE ON ENGLISH POETRY

### IV

# The Influence of English Poetry upon the Romantic Revival on the Continent

By

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# WARTON LECTURE ON ENGLISH POETRY

## IV

### THE INFLUENCE OF ENGLISH POETRY UPON THE ROMANTIC REVIVAL ON THE CONTINENT

By PROFESSOR C. VAUGHAN

*Delivered October 29, 1913*

THE subject of my lecture is the influence of English poetry upon the earlier stages of the romantic revival on the Continent: that is, roughly speaking, during the thirty years from 1750 to 1780. And I must ask your permission at once to extend and to limit the scope of what you might naturally understand to be included in my theme. I shall extend it by using the term 'poetry', as the Germans do, to include all forms of imaginative writing, whether verse or prose. I shall limit it by confining myself almost entirely to the two chief literatures of western Europe: to those of France and Germany; and, for reasons that you will easily divine, to the former still more than the latter.

For the first of these liberties I can hardly bring myself to make an apology. And, if one be needed, I trust the shade of Thomas Warton will forgive me. The second, I must say, I take with deep compunction. It means that I shall do scant justice to the influence of England during this period. It means that I shall blind your eyes to its almost unlimited extent. But I could only save myself from this injustice at the cost of wrecking the whole lecture. And all I can do is to ask you to bear in mind that France and Germany are, in this matter, typical of all Europe; that the influence of England, during this period, was at work from the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries upon the north to Italy on the south, from Spain and Portugal upon the west to Russia in the east.

Consider the significance of this in the history of letters. Contrast it with what has commonly been the case. In all other periods, England—so far as she has stood in any relation to continental literature, so far as she has not been altogether isolated—has been content to receive. It was so in the Middle Ages; it was so in the Eliza-

bethan age; it was so in the Restoration period; it was so, though to a less extent, even in the Augustan age. For, though Pope was the most consummate, the most finished master of all that we mean by the Augustan temper, yet his ideals, his style, his inspiration, were all, in the last resort, drawn from France. In this period, and in this alone, England did not receive, but give. It was in England that the movement started which, under different forms in each country, gave fresh life to the literature of Europe. It was in England the seed was sown, the harvest of which was reaped during the next half century by all the nations of Europe, and the last fruits of which have even yet perhaps not been fully gathered in.

The burning points in this strange period of ferment are to be found in the three creations most characteristic of the time: in Poetry (lyric, descriptive, and ballad), in the Novel, and in Tragedy. I propose to take each of these, and offer one or two illustrations of my opening assertion. I propose also, as I have said already, to draw my examples principally from France.

#### I. POETRY.

Here we are mainly concerned with the influence of Ossian and Percy. But the influence of Gray, and the poets who may be grouped with Gray, must in no wise be neglected.

Think first of the magic effects which followed the publication of Macpherson's *Ossian* (1760-1763). Think how the questionable translation spread like wild-fire over the face of Europe. It was translated into French by no less a man than Turgot; at a later time by Baour-Lormian, and others. It left the deepest mark upon the rhetoric of the revolutionary orators and Napoleon. Its influence may be traced at least as late as the early novels of George Sand. A curious instance of it—not indeed in France, but in Germany—survives in the name of Bismarck's sister, who was born as late as 1827. What could have an odder effect than to find that grim brother, least sentimental of men, writing lively letters to *theuerste Malvine*, or going out fox-shooting with a dog christened *Fingal* to match (1844)? Was the future Chancellor godfather to the latter?

In Italy the book was translated by one of the foremost poets and critics of the period, Cesarotti; and it was through Cesarotti that it first became known to Napoleon. So we might go on through every literature of Europe; ending with things so remote from us as the tragedies of Ozerov in Russia. But perhaps the greatest of Macpherson's triumphs was the capture of Goethe—a capture proclaimed to all the world in the close of *Werther's Leiden*. It is true that the

poet, at a later time, made a jesting renouncement of his allegiance : 'You must observe that I made my hero quote Ossian when he was mad, but Homer when he was in his right mind.' But this repudiation must not be taken too much to heart. It is a proof rather of the ready wit of the author than of his serious intention.

The influence of Percy was less disputable in character, making as it did not for exuberance but simplicity. In France it counted for little or nothing ; though it is perhaps worth while to note that the Willow-song of Desdemona, in Letourneur's translation, was among the last things that Rousseau, always alive to the voice of popular poetry, set to music. In Germany, on the other hand, the *Reliques* were a fruitful source of poetic inspiration. Within a few years of publication they had given birth to Herder's *Stimmen der Völker in Liedern* (1773-1774), one of the crucial works of early German Romanticism, and the first jet of a vein from which the author was to draw all that was most fruitful in his wayward, but strangely suggestive genius. This, however, was the least of Percy's achievements. Far more important was his influence upon original creation. The *Reliques*, as Bürger himself tells us, were 'the matins and the even-song' which inspired *Lenore* and *Der wilde Jäger*. To them also, in the last resort, we owe *Der Taucher* of Schiller, and *Erkönig* and *Der König in Thule* of Goethe. A distant echo of them is to be heard even in poems in many ways so remote from them as the *West-östlicher Divan* of Goethe's old age or the *Lorelei* of Heine.

Of Gray, and the poets we naturally associate with Gray, there is less to tell in this connexion. But I may remind you that the *Elegy* was translated, though at a slightly later period, by Marie-Joseph Chénier, the notable brother of the far greater André : and that *The Bard* supplies both the framework and many incidental touches to the most elaborate poem of that Protean figure, the Italian poet Monti. The most curious tribute, however, to the influence of this group of poets is to be found in Goethe's *Dichtung und Wahrheit* ; in the passage where, describing the ferment of sadness which preceded and gave birth to *Werther's Leiden*, he mentions Gray as the finished type of this phase of feeling, and quotes—not indeed from Gray, but from one of his brother poets—the lines which to him summed up the whole mood and temper of the day :

To griefs congenial prone,  
More wounds than nature gave he knew ;  
And Misery's form his fancy drew  
In dark, ideal hues and horrors not her own.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, Buch xiii.

Taken together, the work of all the English poets I have mentioned may be said to have done this for the literature of Europe: It restored the charm of the 'old, unhappy, far-off things', which had long been neglected and even flouted. It awakened the sense of the sublime, which had slumbered since Milton. It reopened all eyes to the spell of outward nature. It gave voice to the sadness which lies at the core of all that is deepest in thought and feeling, which was more poignant and more genuine at that period than in most others, and which, for near a century past, had found little or no utterance in poetry.

## II. THE NOVEL.

With the Novel there may be more difficulty in making up our minds. Indeed, as so often happens, there is likely to be a succession of changes in the estimate that we form. Our first thoughts will perhaps be that, in the history of the French and German Novel during this period, English influence is everything. Our second thoughts will tell us that it counts for little, or nothing. But our third thoughts, I cannot but think, will bring us back to a point far nearer our first thoughts than our second.

For practical purposes, the English novelists whose influence we have to consider may be reduced to two—Richardson and Sterne. For Fielding, large though he looms, and I trust will always loom, in this country, had too much of the open air—he brought, I think we must add, too strong a whiff of the English farm-yard—to be quite palatable to polite readers in Germany and France. Goethe, for instance, has much to say of Richardson and Sterne. On Fielding, so far as I remember, he never opens his mouth.

What, then, was the influence of these two men? In some moods, we may be disposed to say that it is all to be summed up in the one word, 'sentiment'. And if we are careful to guard against misconception, I do not think we need raise much objection. With this precaution, the much-abused word will perhaps serve as well as any other. In this connexion, 'sentiment' must on no account be limited to its first and obvious signification. In addition to that, it must be taken to mean three things which, in the story of the growth of the Novel, are of the first importance. It meant, firstly, a firmer grasp of plot and situation; a set purpose of giving, to all that constitutes them both, a higher value, a heavier stress, than they had ever received before. Contrast Sterne or Richardson with Defoe, in their handling of these matters—Sterne for situation, Richardson both for it and plot—and you will see at once what I have in mind. And, though the *Princesse*



*de Clèves* had forestalled much of their achievement in this matter by nearly a century, that was an isolated instance; and, with all its genius, I do not think it had much influence upon the novels which followed. It meant, secondly, a deeper sense of the springs of character and passion. It meant, lastly, the introduction of an entirely new element into the being of the Novel: the personality of the author. I need hardly say that the first two of these changes were, in the main, due to Richardson; the last, on the other hand, was the unchallenged discovery of Sterne.

Let me now take one or two examples from the literature of Germany and France. I begin with Sterne, as manifestly, for our purposes, the lesser light. In France—to a less extent, in Germany also—the influence of Sterne was, on the whole, an influence of sentiment, in the most obvious meaning of the word. And it is abundantly clear that the *Sentimental Journey* bulked far more largely in the mind both of authors and readers than its far greater forerunner. The former was translated into French as early as 1769; the latter not until six years later.<sup>1</sup> The humour of Sterne flowed off his foreign admirers without leaving much impression. For his sentiment they sat gaping with open mouths. And all the anecdotes related by Garat, in his *Memoirs of Suard*, go to strengthen this conclusion. Still, to this general rule there are happy exceptions. One of these is Frénais' translation of *Tristram*, the very looseness of which is a signal proof of the degree to which he had steeped his mind in the whims of his author's humour. Again and again he thrusts aside the authentic text, to replace it by the freest improvisations of his own: improvisations which often hardly fall short of the original. As a translator he may stand condemned. But nothing could bear stronger witness to the magnetic, compelling genius of Sterne. Another instance is furnished by the later creations of Diderot: by *Jacques le Fataliste* and possibly by his one unstumbling masterpiece, *Le Neveu de Rameau*. Diderot had nearly always a dash of the impostor. And it must be confessed that, in *Jacques le Fataliste*, his imitations of Sterne are hardly to be distinguished from bare-faced thefts. Of *Le Neveu de Rameau* I do not think it possible to speak with certainty. It has been suggested that the whole method of portraiture—and, in particular, the vivid use of gesture to drive home the character of his disreputable hero—was an inspiration from Sterne.

<sup>1</sup> Both were by Frénais; but his translation of *Tristram* ended with the fourth volume. There were two rival completions: by de Bonnay and Griffet de la Baume; both appeared in 1785. See an interesting study on *Laurence Sterne en France*, by Dr. F. B. Barton (Paris, 1911), to which I am much indebted.

And it is conceivable that it was so.<sup>1</sup> I cannot but think, however, that the inspiration is more likely to have come from the original of the portrait. For portrait it is, however masterful the idealization. It would be pleasant to think that Sterne guided the brush of the painter. But I should like to feel more certain than I do.<sup>2</sup>

Germany has no such masterpiece to bring forward in illustration of the influence wielded—or possibly wielded—by Sterne. All I can offer on the point is a reminder that the most pregnant estimate of Sterne ever written is that to be found in the *Sprüche* of Goethe; and a suggestion, not over-confident, that much of the portraiture in the early parts of *Wilhelm Meister*—that of the Players and other strolling figures—owes not a little of its bold tolerance to lessons first learned in the school of ‘the liberator’. And it may not be altogether without significance that *Le Neveu de Rameau* was first made known to the world in Goethe’s translation (1805); the original, which had got lost in the interval, was not published till half a generation later (1823), and, even then, in a garbled shape.

The influence of Richardson is less impalpable and more easy to trace. From Prévost onwards it was the ruling force in France. I might appeal to the dithyrambs of Diderot: ‘Divine Richardson! If I have to sell all my books, I will keep thee and place thee on the same shelf as Moses, Homer, Sophocles, and Euripides’—a sufficiently varied company of the blest. I appeal with still more confidence to the testimony of Rousseau: ‘of all romances, there is not one which equals *Clarissa*, or even distantly approaches it’.<sup>3</sup> It is true that, after the appearance of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, this fine rapture was somewhat abated.<sup>4</sup> But that was in the nature of things. What

<sup>1</sup> There is a little difficulty about the dates. For it is sometimes assumed that *Le Neveu* was written immediately after the appearance of Palissot’s *Les Philosophes* (May, 1760). Even this would not necessarily bar out the influence of *Tristram*, which was published early in that year. But the truth is that there is no evidence for supposing that *Le Neveu* was begun so early. All we can say is that it cannot well have been begun earlier. And there is abundant evidence to show that Diderot was still at work at it so late as 1774–1775. The editor of the original manuscript, long lost but at last discovered on a Paris bookstall, dates the handwriting in the years 1774–1777. See Elzevir ed. by Monval and Thoinan (Paris, 1891).

<sup>2</sup> The most zealous of Sterne’s disciples was Jean-Claude Gorgy, who published a *Nouveau Voyage sentimental* in 1784, and *Ann’ Quin Bredouille, ou le Petit Cousin de Tristram Shandy*, a novel with a political purpose, in 1791–1792. See Barton, pp. 43–63.

<sup>3</sup> *Lettre à d’Alembert*.

<sup>4</sup> See his letter to Panckoucke of May 25, 1764. Panckoucke had proposed that he should abridge Richardson. He replies: ‘Je me fais bien du scrupule de toucher aux ouvrages de Richardson, surtout pour les abrégés: car je

author was ever able to view his own children as critically as the rest of the world? And there is nothing to show that his zeal for *Clarissa* ever seriously cooled. On the contrary, his visit to England only strengthened his faith in Richardson's fidelity to life.<sup>1</sup>

It may well be that the men of that day saw more in Richardson than it is possible for later eyes to discover. It is certain that what they took from him was altered out of all knowledge in the taking; that they added much—a wider social outlook, the lyric cry, the setting of outward nature—of which the rival of Moses and Homer had never dreamed. But that, again, is in the nature of things; and, after all, it is the best proof of the fruitfulness of the vein which Richardson had struck. It was something to have produced a crop of imitators. It was far more to have inspired men of larger scope, of greater genius, than his own. And this is the pride which nothing can take from him. When all is said, it remains true that Rousseau and others built upon the foundations which he had laid; that the Novel of the next fifty years owed more to his, than to any other single inspiration.

Of his influence on Germany I will content myself with a solitary instance. But it is, I think, a striking one; and it is one which I do not remember to have seen anywhere noticed. When Goethe lost his sister Cornelia, he tells us he was much concerned to leave some imaginative record of 'so notable a character'. He cast about for the best way of carrying out his purpose; and at once came to the conclusion that the only possible form was that of 'the Richardsonian romance'.<sup>2</sup> Other interests drove him from his resolve. But he always deeply regretted this. And I, for one, must share most heartily in his regrets. What could have been more exciting than to watch Goethe at work upon matter so unfamiliar, and under the guidance of a genius so different, in many ways so alien, from his own?

### III. TRAGEDY.

France was the stronghold of 'classical' Tragedy. And at the beginning of our period the supremacy of the classical model was virtually unchallenged. Forty years later large breaches had been made in the walls of the fortress. Another forty years, and it had been practically blown up. Thus it was during the thirty years of

n'aimerais guère être abrégé, moi-même, bien que je sente le besoin qu'en auraient plusieurs de mes écrits: ceux de Richardson en ont besoin incontestablement.'

<sup>1</sup> See his letter to Mirabeau of April 8, 1767.

<sup>2</sup> *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, Buch vi.

our period that the sovereignty of the classical dramatists was first definitely sapped. And it was from England that the weapons of assault were avowedly drawn. In all literary movements, it is well, when we can, to seek the evidence of contemporaries. In this case, a first-rate document lies ready to our hand. This is the manifesto against classical Tragedy drawn up by Sébastien Mercier, one of the quickest wits of the time, I should say, in all ways; certainly one of the leading spirits among the band of rebels.<sup>1</sup> This indictment, it is curious to note, tallies point by point with that launched exactly half a century later by Victor Hugo, in his famous Preface to *Cromwell* (1828). It marks the first stage of the assault upon classical Tragedy, as the other is the blare of trumpets which heralded its triumphant conclusion.

What, then, are the main heads of Mercier's accusation? They amount to a declaration of war upon both the form and the spirit of the classical tradition; and—apart from an attack upon the Unities, which speaks for itself—they may be reduced to three. According to him, classical Tragedy fails, because it is mechanical; because it is monotonous; because it sacrifices everything to elegance, particularly elegance of style. Let us hear what he has to say upon each of these in turn.

1. Classical Tragedy is mechanical. 'Our tragedies are mechanical. The hand of the mechanist makes itself felt at every turn. He is always at work, tying Gordian knots, which he then ingeniously undoes . . . Our heroes are all fantastic beings, the mere creatures of the poet. They always stand bolt upright, without shifting their pose. They are obedient servants of the rhyme; they give themselves up to a ceaseless flow of chatter; they are always repeating a long row of empty maxims. He drags them by main force upon the stage, and kicks them off when he has done with them. They are puppets who move in obedience to the wires which drive them, like marionettes, into an action which has been deliberately entangled and, just for that reason, is infinitely false.'<sup>2</sup>

2. It is monotonous. 'Almost all our tragedies, like the novels of La Calprenède, are a triumph of absurdity. Or, rather, we have but one single tragedy. All are cast in the same mould, all sing the same tune, all follow the same road. . . . There is the tyrant with arched eyebrows; the confidant always submissive and always assumed to be discreet; the Princess always in love and always standing on

<sup>1</sup> Mercier, *De la littérature et des littérateurs* (1778). Much the same doctrine had already been put forward in his *Essai sur l'art dramatique* (1773).

<sup>2</sup> *De la littérature*, pp. 25, 93.

her dignity ; the young Prince always unhappy, and always beloved. All they do is to change their place, as at a gambling-table. They were on the left ; the poet, by a miraculous stroke of genius, sets them on the right. They did wear a helmet ; he gives them a turban. They drew their breath at Rome ; he transports them to Persia '—all this rather an unkind cut at Voltaire—'and, with the help of the foot-lights and the prompter, this solemn caricature is allowed to pass as though it were not supremely ridiculous.'

Again—and you will at once see the significance of this—'A curse on the lips which said that there are few characters really distinct from others ! In fact, each individual lives his life to himself ; and the man who could advance so gross an error was hopelessly blind. Read Richardson, read Shakespeare ; and you will see all that lies in the heart of a single man ; you will judge whether there are any two men who have exactly the same voice and the same way of standing.'<sup>1</sup>

3. Finally, it sacrifices everything to elegance. 'The tyrant kills himself, or else he is killed. But it is always done in such a way as no one in the whole world has ever seen. The dying man, like a Roman gladiator, expires with such grace that you would think he was falling asleep. It is not enough to let himself be assassinated. Before so polite an audience he must also be perfectly polished and decorous, even to his last breath. No convulsions, if you please. In France, the poison of the murderer's cup is always opium. . . . Our dramatists succeed in being elegant. They succeed also in being perfectly absurd. . . . The characters being so ill chosen, it was inevitable that their eloquence should be rather that of the poet than of a human being. A conventional language has taken the place of nature. But these sonorous verses, these happy touches, are nothing more than gold spangles fastened on a stuff which has no substance. The embroidery is superb ; the ground-work is not worth it. . . . Imagine the prose of Rousseau spoken on the French stage ; and you will see how all these fine verses turn pale.'<sup>2</sup>

At last, gathering up all his charges into one sweeping blow, he breaks out : 'We are blind enough to desert living nature where all the muscles stand out, swelling, full of life and meaning. And we steal off to draw a Greek or Roman carcass, to paint its livid cheeks, to drape its cold limbs, to set it up upon its tottering feet, to impose upon that glazed eye, that icy tongue, those stiff arms, the glance, the language, and the gesture which are accepted as the proper thing upon the boards of the French stage.'<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Ib.*, pp. 119, 101, 105.

<sup>2</sup> *Ib.*, pp. 101, 95, 100, 111.

<sup>3</sup> *Ib.*, p. 135.



From this gloomy bulletin it is easy to see that, in Mercier's opinion, French Tragedy lay upon her death-bed. What are the remedies which he and others attempted or prescribed? They are two; and both of them, to the scandal of all good patriots, were made in England.

The first was to substitute prose—the prose of passion and of Rousseau—for the stilted Alexandrine. On that part of the subject I am unable to touch. The second was to send the Princes and Princesses into banishment, and to fill their places with plain men and women. Hence that form of tragedy so dear to the heart of the eighteenth century, and known among most nations as *bourgeois tragedy*, or in France by the less tell-tale name of *le drame*.<sup>1</sup> This was a revolution in the whole conception of Tragedy. And the model for it was avowedly supplied by two plays produced in London, the one long before the middle of the century, the other nearly twenty years later—*George Barnwell*, by Lillo (1735), and *The Gamester*, by Moore (1753). For the next generation this was the most popular form of Tragedy both in France and Germany; and it spread over the greater part of western Europe. Indeed, with infinite refinements, it remains the only vital form of Tragedy at the present day.

As for its triumph in Germany, a mere glance must suffice. Lessing's *Miss Sara Sampson* (1755) is a bourgeois tragedy of the purest water. Even *Emilia Galotti* (1778), though it ultimately broke through the mould intended for it, was first conceived as a bourgeois tragedy, and nothing more. More typical than either of these, perhaps, is the play which gave its name to the whole period of ferment, that crudest of gasconades, the *Sturm und Drang* of Klinger (1775). Think again of such plays as Kotzebue's *Menschenhass und Reue*, the immortal *Stranger* of Miss Costigan, a little later (1789); think of the early plays of Schiller, *Kabale und Liebe* (1784), and even, though it refuses to toe the line exactly, the far more memorable *Räuber* (1781); remember finally that Goethe himself, in *Clavigo* and his own cherished *Stella*—particularly in her later and more chastened form—surrendered to the fashion; and you will see how irresistible that fashion must have been.

Still more surprising is the vogue of bourgeois tragedy, *le drame*, in France. For there the prejudice against any kind of innovation was far more deeply rooted; and Voltaire, in particular, though he

<sup>1</sup> It is often extremely hard to draw the line between the 'sentimental comedy', the 'bourgeois tragedy', and the 'romantic tragedy' of this period. Fortunately, for our purpose there is little need to do so.

had occasional fits of repentance, was loud in condemnation. Yet, in the face of all these obstacles, it increased and multiplied exceedingly. And the list of those who tried their hand at it would be a formidable matter. Among the first to do so was Diderot in those curious hybrids, *Le Fils naturel* and *Le Père de famille* (1757-8). And after him a whole host of followers rushed into the breach. Sedaine, Saurin, Beaumarchais, despite his essentially comic genius, Marie-Joseph Chénier, who has been reckoned—not very wisely, as I must think—a disciple of Voltaire: these were among the most conspicuous figures in the fray. Even La Harpe, who to later days has passed for a type of classical obduracy and who was certainly a nurseling of Voltaire, was among the prophets. So, it is hardly necessary to say, was Mercier, who by his zeal in the cause earned himself the name of *dramomane*. So, in a more distinctly tragic vein, were Du Belloy and Lemierre.

It may be noted that many of these, much to the disgust of Voltaire, wrote their plays in prose: an innovation which rested here, as in Germany, upon the highly questionable assumption that prose was the more natural vehicle of passion, but which had at least the merit of affronting the respectabilities of the 'Greeks'. Indeed, on one occasion (1775) Buffon—though this was on a question of matter rather than of form—took the classicists to task, in full Academy, for their 'servile' devotion to the ancients. And Mercier, immensely delighted to have picked up so powerful an ally, records how 'all the Greek faces of the Academy turned pale' with horror and surprise.<sup>1</sup>

There is no time, amusing though it might be, to attempt any account of these plays in detail. I must content myself with a brief reference to three. The first of these is Sedaine's *Maillard, ou Paris sauvé*, a drama founded on the history of Étienne Marcel. In this play a cradle, with a baby crooning and wailing inside it, appears, at the crisis of the action, unabashed upon the stage. And such was the dismay caused by this insult to the 'convenances'—coupled with the deadly offence given by the author's prose—that the drama, rejected with contumely by the Théâtre français, was kicked across the whole breadth of Europe, unable to find harbourage till it was taken in by Catherine of Russia (1781).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Buffon's assault belongs to 1775. It is printed in the *Panthéon littéraire*. Mercier's reference to it occurs in *De la littérature et des littérateurs*, p. 135.

<sup>2</sup> See Sedaine's dedication of the play to Catherine. It was written in 1771, but its first performance in Paris was in 1783. It may be mentioned that Catherine herself adapted *The Merry Wives of Windsor* for her private theatre; an act which charity may set off against her misdeeds in other departments.

The two other plays are both by Lemierre: *Guillaume Tell* and *La Veuve de Malabar* (1766-86, 1770-80). The history of both throws a curious light upon the prejudices of the orthodox and the slowly gathering courage of the heretics. In the original version of *Tell*, the shooting of the apple was decorously related in a messenger's speech. It was not until twenty years later, when the Revolution was knocking at the door, that the author—and actor—had the courage to risk the shot actually upon the stage. Much the same is the story of *La Veuve de Malabar*. When it first came out, the funeral pile was decently hidden in a deep trench. Only the crest of the flames was visible from the pit. But, as years went on, Lemierre took heart of grace and nerved himself to bring the suttee, large as life, bodily upon the scene. Imagine the feelings of the audience, as a 'herculean but handsome' actor (Larive) leapt into the burning fiery furnace before the very eyes of the audience, and rescued the widow unsinged, in her coat, her hosen, and her hat.

For all these plays, as I have said, *The Gamester* and *George Barnwell* were the ultimate models; a strong dose of romantic wine in the classical water was the ultimate result. It is a curious thought that Moore and Lillo should have triumphed, where Calderon, and even Shakespeare, had been powerless to help. One more instance, if one were needed, of the old maxim: 'habent sua fata libelli'—books too have their chances.

This brings us straight to the last remedy prescribed for the rejuvenation of Tragedy: 'Follow in the steps of Shakespeare.' Is it altogether true that the voice of Shakespeare, at this turning-point, was ingloriously mute? Or had it more influence than his jealous countrymen are apt to suppose? I leave you to judge.

Of Germany time forbids me to say anything at all. I will only remind you that Goethe speaks of him, during these years of 'storm and stress', as 'the father and master of us all'.<sup>1</sup> Whether the father would have found it altogether easy to recognize his offspring is another matter. Fortunately, he had infinite humour and no false sense of shame.

He could not have done without either quality in judging the claims of his eager 'children' in France. It was in this generation, it must be remembered, that he first became widely known across the Channel. And the acquaintance, as might have been expected, called forth the extremes of admiration and disgust. As crucial instances of the former, I take the adaptations of Ducis

<sup>1</sup> *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, Buch xiii; compare B. xi.

and the translation of Letourneur. The latter will be sufficiently illustrated in the course of my account.

Ducis was not the only man bold enough to refashion Shakespeare to the taste of the French stage. Here again, the ubiquitous Mercier was on the war-path: with *Les Tombeaux de Vérone* (1782) and *Timon of Athens* (1795). But the work of Ducis is far more typical of the movement; it was more sweeping in its methods; it had a greater vogue; and it was first upon the scene. His earliest effort, as any critic might have foretold, was *Hamlet*, in 1769. His last was *Othello*, in 1792. After that he had no heart to go further. Tragedies enough, he tells us pathetically, were being enacted at his door. *Macbeth* and *Othello* will furnish ample examples of his method.

The former opens under a murky sky, 'in the most sinister region of an ancient forest'—*un site épouvantable*. Duncan, years before, has entrusted his only son, Malcolm, to Sévar, a virtuous Highlander, to be reared far from the poisonous air of Courts. He now comes to learn from Sévar how his young charge has profited by the education of nature: whether he is base and grasping, or just, and therefore worthy to be king. The play, I may remind you, was written during the first year of the Revolution. The answer is all that could be desired. But, as Duncan breaks out into fervent thanksgivings, a deep groan—*un gémissement douloureux*—is heard; and the Witches either do, or do not, appear, according to the taste of the stage-manager, or his calculations of what the audience will put up with. It is manifest that Ducis, like Schiller afterwards, was highly nervous on the point. If they do appear, they are staged to figure not as Witches, but as a blend of Fates and Furies: the first armed with a sceptre, the second with a dagger, the third with a serpent (to signify Revenge), and, like an Elizabethan Ghost of Revenge, with a threefold cry for blood—*Du sang, du sang, du sang!* No wonder that Sévar remarks, 'What a hateful landscape we have here!'

After this opening, the play proceeds much as in Shakespeare, save that the murders of Duncan and Banquo are rolled into one, and that it is the Ghost not of Banquo, but of Duncan, who appears, when the crown is offered to Macbeth. From this point again, the French play diverges from the English. Immediately after the Coronation, the virtuous Highlander presents himself unbidden, bringing Malcolm to the Court. Macbeth, pursued by Duncan's Ghost and smitten with remorse, presses the Crown upon the youth, who, with a thousand regrets for the state of nature he must now abandon, reluctantly consents. Frédégonde—that is, Lady Macbeth—gets wind of this, and determines to prevent it. Having set assassins for Malcolm, she wiles

away the interval by walking in her sleep. With Sévar and Malcolm for witnesses, she enters bearing a dagger in her right hand and a torch in her left. She sinks into a chair, sheathing the one and laying the other on the table. Then her soul unburdens itself, as she alternately makes plunges to right and left with an air-drawn dagger into a visionary Malcolm, or clasps an imaginary infant, her own son, to her bosom. At length she passes out and, still walking in her sleep, drives the dagger into her own sleeping child, whom she mistakes for Malcolm. She is forthwith seized by the Guards for a manifest murderess; and Macbeth kills himself in horror. But, always ready to oblige, Ducis kindly provides a variant in which the assassins, set by Frédégonde for Malcolm, slay Macbeth by mistake; upon which the Queen stabs herself in despair.

It would be unfair not to add that some of the speeches, especially those which are clearly suggested by the original, are full of a gloomy eloquence which, in spite of the current verdict that his style was 'barbarous', it is impossible not to admire.<sup>1</sup> It must be admitted, however, that the tragedy is shifted from the heart to the outward trappings; and that the horrors of Shakespeare, which have commonly been reckoned the chief obstacle to his acceptance on the French stage, turn pale before those of Ducis.

Much the same is true of his *Othello*. And the changes in the plot of this—I do not propose to trouble you with them—are still more sweeping than in *Macbeth*. The two things that seem to have troubled him most sorely were the villainy of Iago and the colour of Othello. 'As for the latter,' he tells us, 'I have thought it within my rights to dispense myself from giving him a black face. I have made up my mind that a yellow, copper hue would suffice. For an African, this is suitable enough. And it has the further advantage of not revolting the public, and in particular the ladies. Besides, it will allow the spectators to enjoy to the full the greatest delight the theatre can offer: I mean, the varied charms that the play of passion gives to the eager, changeful countenance of a young actor'—the compliment is to Talma—'boiling over with fiery feeling, and intoxicated by jealousy and love.'

The character of the villain of the piece was an obstacle yet harder to surmount. Had Pézaro, the transfigured Iago, shown his true mettle at the start, he would, Ducis was assured, have been hissed off the stage in the first scene. Accordingly, during the first four acts he

<sup>1</sup> La Harpe is recorded to have said: 'It is well that Ducis's style is what it is. Otherwise, he would have crushed us all.' Compare Grimm's *Correspondance*, Feb. 1778.



appears as the virtuous friend of both parties. It is only in the fifth, and behind the scene, that his true nature is unmasked. This may have been a convenient subterfuge for Ducis. The only objection is that it makes shipwreck of the whole play. Remove Iago's cunning, and Othello's jealousy falls to the ground. All that is left to the unhappy author is to devise a tissue of absurd acts on the part of Desdemona, to take the villain's place.

Even with these mitigations, the audience rose in open revolt when it came to the murder of the heroine. 'Never was there an effect more full of terror. The whole theatre rose, uttering one cry. Several women fainted. One would have said that the dagger with which Othello had just struck his bride—the pillow was manifestly impossible—had pierced every heart. But with the applause there gradually mingled reproaches, protests, finally a kind of general revolt.<sup>1</sup> For a moment I thought that the curtain would have to be rung down. Do I deceive myself in supposing that this indignation sprang from the very admiration I had excited for my heroine: an admiration which, finding itself betrayed at the last moment, was turned into despair and vented its grief upon the author of the disappointment?'

Still, there were twelve performances of the offending tragedy. 'However, I had taken the hint; and, profiting by the construction of my piece, which made alteration an easy matter'—what a confession!—'I substituted a happy ending for that which had inflicted so deep a wound.' This was achieved by the simple device of causing Iago's villainy to be detected at the last moment, so that all ends in smiles and contentment. 'I must confess, however, that the original ending still seems to me much the more appropriate and the more moral.'

Such were the woes of those who strove to make Shakespeare palatable to an eighteenth-century audience in France. Always halting between two opinions, they had the courage of neither. They stood condemned to miss both the elegance of the classical model and the ruthless force of Shakespeare's.

Altogether, the criticism of Grimm—or rather Meister—is not quite beside the mark. 'The theatre of Shakespeare may be an excellent thing for the English; but it is only that of Corneille and Racine which can be any good to us. When the English attempt to imitate the regularity of our Drama'—think of *Cato* or *Irene*—'they have shown themselves cold and feeble. And when, in our turn, we have risked taking them for guides, we have only succeeded in

<sup>1</sup> One of the audience called out: 'Non! un pareil spectacle n'est pas fait pour des Français.' See *Répertoire du Théâtre français* (Petitot), t. xxiv, p. 53.

producing atrocities and extravagances, refining upon the faults of our models without their energy and originality.’<sup>1</sup>

The other great move in the Anglomania game was the prose translation of Shakespeare by Letourneur. This appeared, with a high flourish of trumpets, from 1776 to 1782. It was dedicated to the King, and among the subscribers to it were most of the notable names of France.

On the whole, it must be hailed as a very creditable performance. Occasionally the neophytes—there were others at work besides Letourneur—betray some bewilderment. ‘Excellent wretch!’ for instance, appears as ‘Interesting orphan! simple child! admirable creature!’<sup>2</sup>—which, I fancy, is hardly the same thing. But in general they are commendably faithful to the original; more so, I think, for the most part, than their German rivals, Wieland and Eschenburg. And this demanded courage. So did the bold tribute of the Preface to Shakespeare, ‘the God of the theatre’.

All that concerns us here, however, is to insist that it was intended to be, and was, the rudest possible challenge to the classical tradition; and to remind you how more than rudely that challenge was taken up. There was one Frenchman, at any rate, who refused to bow the knee to the new Baal; one French voice which was loudly raised in repudiation of the strange god and all his works. This, I need hardly say, was Voltaire. Well over eighty when the first volumes appeared, the old warrior sprang at once to arms. And, as his eye ran over the list of subscribers, his fury knew no bounds. The King and Queen headed the list. Then came three magnates—Choiseul, Turgot, and Necker—who were successively chief Ministers of France. Then such men as Malesherbes and Mirabeau, Diderot and d’Holbach; and, as you will at once have foreseen, the irrepressible Mercier and Ducis. What was yet more alarming was that the chief publishers were down for large orders, one of them for more than a hundred copies; so that the venom was sure to be distilled throughout the land. But worse remained behind. There also were d’Argental, ‘beneath the shadow of whose wings’ Voltaire was always praying ‘to take refuge’; and—most unkindest cut of all—Catherine, Autocrat of all the Russias: Saint Catherine, Minerva, Semiramis, Star of the North, and Heaven knows how many other endearing nicknames.

This was more than the patriarch could stand. All his artillery, light and heavy, was at once wheeled into action. And the piece of resistance, the reading of a solemn protest on the Day of St. Louis, the

<sup>1</sup> *Correspondance de Grimm*, April, 1774.

<sup>2</sup> It is fair to say that there is a note of apology.

gala-day of the French Academy, was immediately secured. Voltaire composed the manifesto. His henchman, d'Alembert, perpetual Secretary of the Academy, was proud to read it. Two things only vexed the soul of the Commander of the Faithful. One was that he himself, in his hot youth, had been the first to introduce the insidious poison to his countrymen. This was disposed of by the jesting admission that he had indeed soiled his hands by 'picking up a few pearls from the dung-hill of this drunken savage'—might heaven have mercy upon his sins! The other was harder to contend against. 'It is clear', he writes in the bitterness of his heart, 'that the full extent of the infamy could be revealed only by a literal translation of the coarse words of the *delicate* Shakespeare. And how profane the polite ears of the ladies by such atrocities as . . .?' But M. d'Alembert is not wanting in malice. 'Cannot he pause at these sacramental words? Cannot he, in the very act of suppressing the exact phrase, let the public understand that he has not the courage to translate the *decent* Shakespeare, in all his glory? I cannot but think that this reticence and this modesty will charm the Assembly; that they will understand far more evil than they actually hear.'<sup>1</sup>

The great day at length arrived. The Academy assembled in full force. The just gathered in their hundreds to witness the triumph of the good cause and the rout of the alien. Mrs. Montagu, the lady of the peacock-hangings, was there, to be dragged at the chariot-wheels of the conqueror. The faithful d'Alembert exactly followed the precepts of his astute master. And before the meeting was half over, the two culprits, Shakespeare and Letourneur—'that clown Shakespeare and that Merry-Andrew Letourneur'—were rolled over and over in the mud showered upon them by their terrible assailant. Only one of the audience had the courage to throw himself athwart the torrent of derision. It was an English boy of twelve, who had been brought there by his mother. In the middle of one of the bursts of applause, he was heard piping out: 'Give me a hooter! I want to hiss that Voltaire'. 'But hissing is not allowed, my little man.' 'How's that, then? I hear plenty of cheering'.<sup>2</sup> I have cast the horoscope of that young man, and find that, when the battle of Waterloo was fought, he was just of an age to be Colonel or perhaps General. I have no doubt that he used his chance, to wipe off old scores—the unacknowledged victor of Napoleon.

<sup>1</sup> Letter to La Harpe of Aug. 15, 1776. Compare the letter to d'Alembert of Aug. 10.

<sup>2</sup> The anecdote is told by La Harpe, *Correspondance avec le Grand-Duc Paul*, t. i, pp. 417-18.

Voltaire's triumph was complete. But the old man was always haunted with misgivings. He could never persuade himself that the victory would not one day be followed by a hideous reaction. And when he died, two years later, his forebodings came too true. The man elected by the Academy to fill his seat, of all men in the world, was Ducis. The Patriarch was succeeded by the Arch-heretic. The abomination of desolation was seated in the Temple of the Lord.

May heaven preserve the British Academy from any such signal desecration !





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